

1. ROLES

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a. Designate Staff Responsibilities

Background: Importance of Planning Communication Responsibilities¹

In the event of a public health emergency, it is your agency's responsibility to ensure that appropriate public health information is reaching the public and your partners, either through the media or another communication channel (e.g., a town meeting). There are a number of important risk communication responsibilities that must be addressed to ensure the delivery of timely, accurate information. Effective risk communication requires involves up-front planning, skillful delivery of information during a crisis, and ongoing monitoring.

Steps for Designating Communication Responsibilities

1. Identify the kinds of crises in which your agency would need to play a role in communicating with the media, the public, and your partners.
2. Identify who within your organization is equipped to handle essential communication responsibilities. Depending upon the size and skill of your agency's staff, these responsibilities may be filled by individuals or teams of people.
3. If your organization is not capable of meeting the likely information needs of the media, your partners, and the public during a public health emergency internally, ensure that your plan identifies an outside source from where this response support will come. You may be able to look to MDPH, others within your city or town government, partners from neighboring communities, or your Regional Coalition.

Tools for Planning Communication Responsibilities

In the following pages, you will find these tools to help you plan which staff will be responsible for communicating with the media, the public, and key partners.

1. Communication Responsibilities Checklist. This is a checklist of major communication responsibilities that need to be planned for and implemented during a public health emergency. Use this checklist as a guideline for planning which responsibilities can be handled internally, who within your agency is equipped to handle these responsibilities, and which responsibilities need to be handled externally.

¹ Source: United States Centers For Disease Control and Prevention. 2002. *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*.

2. Key Local Board of Health Contact List: Media, Public, and Partner Information Teams. Use this form to record contact information for individuals responsible for releasing information during a public health emergency.

Communication Responsibilities Checklist²

This checklist details the major communication responsibilities that need to be addressed during a public health emergency. The checklist can be used as a guide to determine:

- *Which communication responsibilities can be handled internally;*
- *Who within your agency is equipped to handle these responsibilities; and*
- *Which responsibilities need to be handled externally.*

Command and Control Responsibilities:

The organization has identified an internal or external person(s) to:

- ☐ Direct the work related to the release of information to the media, public, and partners
- ☐ Activate the plan based on careful assessment of the situation and the expected demands for information by media, partners, and the public
- ☐ Coordinate with horizontal communication partners as outlined in the plan to ensure that messages are consistent and within the scope of the organization's responsibility
- ☐ Provide updates to organization's director, EOC command and higher headquarters, as determined in the plan
- ☐ Advise the director and chain of command regarding information to be released, based on the organization's role in the response
- ☐ Ensure that risk communication principles are employed in all contact with media, public, and partner information release efforts
- ☐ Know incident-specific policy, science, and situation
- ☐ Review and approve materials for release to media, public, and partners
- ☐ Obtain required clearance of materials for release to media on policy or sensitive topic-related information not previously cleared
- ☐ Determine the operational hours/days, and reassesses these throughout the emergency response
- ☐ Ensure that resources are available (human, technical, and mechanical supplies)

² Source: United States Centers For Disease Control and Prevention. 2002. *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*.

Media Responsibilities

The organization has identified an internal or external person(s) to:

- ☐ Assess media needs and organize mechanisms to fulfill those needs during the crisis (e.g., daily briefings in person, versus a Web site update)
- ☐ Triage the response to media requests and inquiries
- ☐ Ensure that media inquiries are addressed as appropriate
- ☐ Support spokespersons
- ☐ Develop and maintain media contact lists and call logs
- ☐ Produce and distribute media advisories and press releases
- ☐ Produce and distribute materials (e.g., fact sheets, B-roll)
- ☐ Oversee media monitoring systems and reports (e.g., analyzing environment and trends to determine needed messages, determining what misinformation needs to be corrected, identifying concerns, interests, and needs arising from the crisis and the response)
- ☐ Ensure that risk communication principles to build trust and credibility are incorporated into all public messages delivered through the media
- ☐ Act as a member of the joint information center or field site team for media relations
- ☐ Serve as a liaison from your organization to the Joint Information Center (JIC)

Public Information Responsibilities

The organization has identified an internal or external person(s) to:

- ☐ Manage the mechanisms to respond to the public who request information directly from the organization by telephone, in writing, or by e-mail
- ☐ Oversee public information monitoring systems and reports (e.g., analyzing environment and trends to determine needed messages, determining what misinformation needs to be corrected, identifying concerns, interests, and needs arising from the crisis and the response)
- ☐ Activate or participate in the telephone information line

- ☐ Activate or participate in the public e-mail response system
- ☐ Activate or participate in the public correspondence response system
- ☐ Organize and manage emergency response Web site and Web pages
- ☐ Establish and maintain links to other emergency response Web sites

Responsibilities Related to Partner/Stakeholder information

The organization has identified an internal or external person(s) to:

- ☐ Establish communication protocols based on prearranged agreements with identified partners and stakeholders
- ☐ Arrange regular partner briefings and updates
- ☐ Solicit feedback and respond to partner information requests and inquiries
- ☐ Oversee partner/stakeholder monitoring systems and reports (e.g., analyzing environment and trends to determine needed messages, determining what misinformation needs to be corrected, identifying concerns, interests, and needs arising from the crisis and the response)
- ☐ Help organize and facilitate official meetings to provide information and receive input from partners or stakeholders
- ☐ Develop and maintain lists and call logs of legislators and special interest groups
- ☐ Respond to legislators, special interest group requests, and inquiries

Responsibilities Related to Content/Materials

The organization has identified an internal or external person(s) to:

- ☐ Develop and establish mechanisms to rapidly receive information from the EOC regarding the public health emergency
- ☐ Translate EOC situation reports and meeting notes into information appropriate for public and partner needs
- ☐ Work with subject matter experts to create situation-specific factsheets, Q/As, and updates

- ☐ Compile information on possible public health emergency topics for release when needed
- ☐ Test messages and materials for cultural and language requirements of special populations
- ☐ Receive input from other communication team members regarding content and message needs
- ☐ Use analysis from media, public, and partner monitoring systems and reports to adopt messages
- ☐ Identify additional content requirements and material development

**Key Local Board of Health Contact List:
Media, Public, and Partner Information Teams**

Use this form to record contact information for individuals responsible for releasing information during a public health emergency.

Name	Work Phone	Home Phone	Cell Phone/Pager	Function(s)/Responsibilities

b. Designate Spokespersons for Public Health Emergency Issues

Background: Importance of Designating Spokespeople for Public Health Emergencies³

A spokesperson's job in a public health emergency is to communicate information the public wants or needs to know with the goal of reducing the incidence of illness and death. A spokesperson brings the organization to life and gives it its human identity. A spokesperson is a conduit to various audiences so the organization does not have to rely entirely on the written word.

Spokespersons must be trained. No person should represent the organization unless he or she has invested time and energy in developing the skills of an effective spokesperson. A spokesperson must have the ability to *effectively* connect with the audience, either through the media or in person.

Steps for Designating Spokespeople

In many cases, your responsibility as a local board of health in communicating with the media, public, and partners may be greatly reduced after you report a crisis situation to MDPH or another state or federal partner. In many other cases, however, your organization may be called upon to organize communications related to a public health emergency, and you should prepare spokespersons for such a situation.

1. Identify the different situations in which your agency would need spokespeople to communicate with the media, the public, and partners.
2. Identify who within your organization has the skills to be a good spokesperson.
3. Designate 1-2 main spokespeople, and consider designating others for more routine assignments in order to prevent exhaustion of your main spokespeople.
4. Develop a "call-down" list in case a spokesperson needs assistance or is unable to perform his/her duties.
5. Train your spokespeople in their duties.
6. Keep your spokespeople updated on situations in which they would be involved.

³ Source: United States Centers For Disease Control and Prevention. 2002. *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*.

Tools for Designating and Training Spokespeople

In the following pages, you will find these tools to help you designate and train your spokespeople:

1. Tips for Spokespeople. This document contains some general advice for spokespeople, including important skills and qualities, guidelines for dealing with a situation, and common pitfalls to avoid.
2. Basic Tenets of Risk and Crisis Communication. This document contains more detailed advice for spokespeople on how to communicate effective messages.

Tips for Spokespeople⁴

This document contains some general advice for spokespeople, including:

- *Important skills and qualities,*
- *Guidelines for dealing with a situation, and*
- *Common pitfalls to avoid.*

Important Skills for Spokespeople

Spokespeople must be able to:

- Identify the nature and source of the harm
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Recognize the enormity of events
- Be highly visible
- Take charge
- Explain how and why the situation may change
- Explain steps that the public can take to decrease its risk
- Keep the public updated about new developments
- Deliver bad news
- Present clear, strong, and empathetic messages
- Anticipate psychological impact on the community.

General Guidelines for Spokespeople

- Every organization has an identity. A spokesperson should try to **embody that identity**.
- As a spokesperson it is important for you to be perceived as **trustworthy and credible**. Research indicates that being perceived as empathetic and caring provides greater opportunity for your message to be received and acted upon. Express empathy or caring within the first 30 seconds.
- Besides empathy, credibility is built on expressions of **competence and expertise**.
- Build trust and **confidence in the organization**, not just in yourself.
- **Know your organization's policies** about the release of information.
- Stay within the **scope of your responsibilities**, unless you are authorized to speak for the entire organization or a higher headquarters.
- Don't answer questions that are not within the scope of your organizational responsibility.
- Give a reason if you can't discuss a subject.
- Tell the **truth**. Be as open as possible.
- **Follow up** on issues.
- Offer to get information you don't have. Provide a timeline or identify steps you are taking to get additional information.

⁴ Source: United States Centers For Disease Control and Prevention. 2002. *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*.

- State your conclusions first, then provide supporting data.
- Correct mistakes by stating you would like an opportunity to clarify.
- Use **visuals** when possible.
- Illustrate a point through examples, stories, and analogies. Ensure that they help you **make your point** and do not minimize or exaggerate your message. Try the stories out on a small group first.

Avoiding pitfalls during emergency communication

- Remember that jargon confuses communication and implies arrogance.
- Use humor cautiously.
- Refute negative allegations without repeating them.
- Avoid speculation.
- When possible, use positive or neutral terms.
- Don't assume you've made your point. Ask whether you've made yourself clear.
- Ultimately, money will become an issue. During the early stage of an emergency, don't lead with messages about money.
- At all costs, avoid one-liners, clichés, and off-the-cuff comments.
- Discuss what you know, not what you think.
- Do not express personal opinions.
- Don't show off. This is not the time to display an impressive vocabulary.

Basic Tenets of Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication⁵

This document contains more detailed advice for spokespeople on how to communicate effective messages.

- ☐ **Don't over-reassure.** The objective is not to placate but to elicit accurate, calm concern.
- ☐ **Acknowledge uncertainty.** Offer only what you know. Show your distress and acknowledge your audience's distress. "It must be awful to hear that we can't answer that question right now . . ."
- ☐ **Emphasize that a process is in place** to learn more. Describe that process in simple terms.
- ☐ **Give anticipatory guidance.** If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know what to expect. (e.g., side effects of antibiotics).
- ☐ **Be regretful, not defensive.** Say, "We are sorry . . ." or "We feel terrible that . . ." when acknowledging misdeeds or failures from the organization. Don't use "regret," which sounds like you're preparing for a lawsuit.
- ☐ **Acknowledge people's fears.** Don't tell people they shouldn't be afraid. They *are* afraid and they have a right to their fears. Don't disparage fear; acknowledge that it's normal and human to be frightened, (even though . . .).
- ☐ **Acknowledge the shared misery.** Some people will be less frightened than they are miserable, feeling hopeless and defeated. Acknowledge the misery of a catastrophic event, then help move people toward the future through positive actions.
- ☐ **Express wishes.** Say, "I wish we knew more," or "I wish our answers were more definitive."
- ☐ **Panic is less common than imagined.** Panic doesn't come from bad news, but from mixed messages. If people are faced with conflicting recommendations and expert advice, they are left with no credible source to turn to for help. That level of abandonment opens the door to charlatans and poor judgment. Candor protects your credibility and reduces the possibility of panic, because your messages will ring true.
- ☐ **Be willing to address the "what if" questions.** These are the questions that everyone is thinking about and they want expert answers. Although it's often impractical to fuel "what ifs" when the crisis is contained and not likely to affect large numbers of people, it is reasonable to answer "what ifs" if the "what if" could happen and people need to be emotionally prepared for them. If you do not answer the "what if" questions, someone at much less risk regarding the outcome of the response will answer them for you. If you are not prepared to address "what ifs," you lose credibility and the opportunity to frame the "what if" questions with reason and valid recommendations.
- ☐ **Give people things to do.** In an emergency, some actions are directed at victims, and those who have been exposed or who have the potential to be exposed. However, those who do not need to take immediate action will be engaging in "vicarious rehearsal" regarding those recommendations and may need substitute actions to ensure that they do not prematurely act on recommendations not meant for them. Simple actions in an emergency will give people a sense of control and will help to motivate them to stay tuned to what is happening (versus

⁵ Source: United States Centers For Disease Control and Prevention. 2002. *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*.

denial, where they refuse to acknowledge the possible danger to themselves and others) and will prepare them to take action when directed to do so. Give people a choice of actions matched to their level of concern. Give a range of responses: a minimum response, a maximum response, and a recommended middle response.

- **Ask more of people.** Perhaps the most important role of the spokesperson is to ask people to bear the risk and work toward solutions with you. People can tolerate considerable risk, especially voluntary risk. If you acknowledge the risk's severity and complexity, and recognize people's fears, you can then ask the best of them. A spokesperson, especially one who is on the ground and at personal risk, can model the appropriate behavior—not false happiness, but true willingness to go on with life as much as possible and to make reasonable choices. Don't be glib—be stalwart. Your determination to face risk will help others looking for role models. Americans have great heart, a sense of selflessness, and a natural competitiveness. Sparking those inherent attributes will help people cope with uncertainty, fear, and misery.